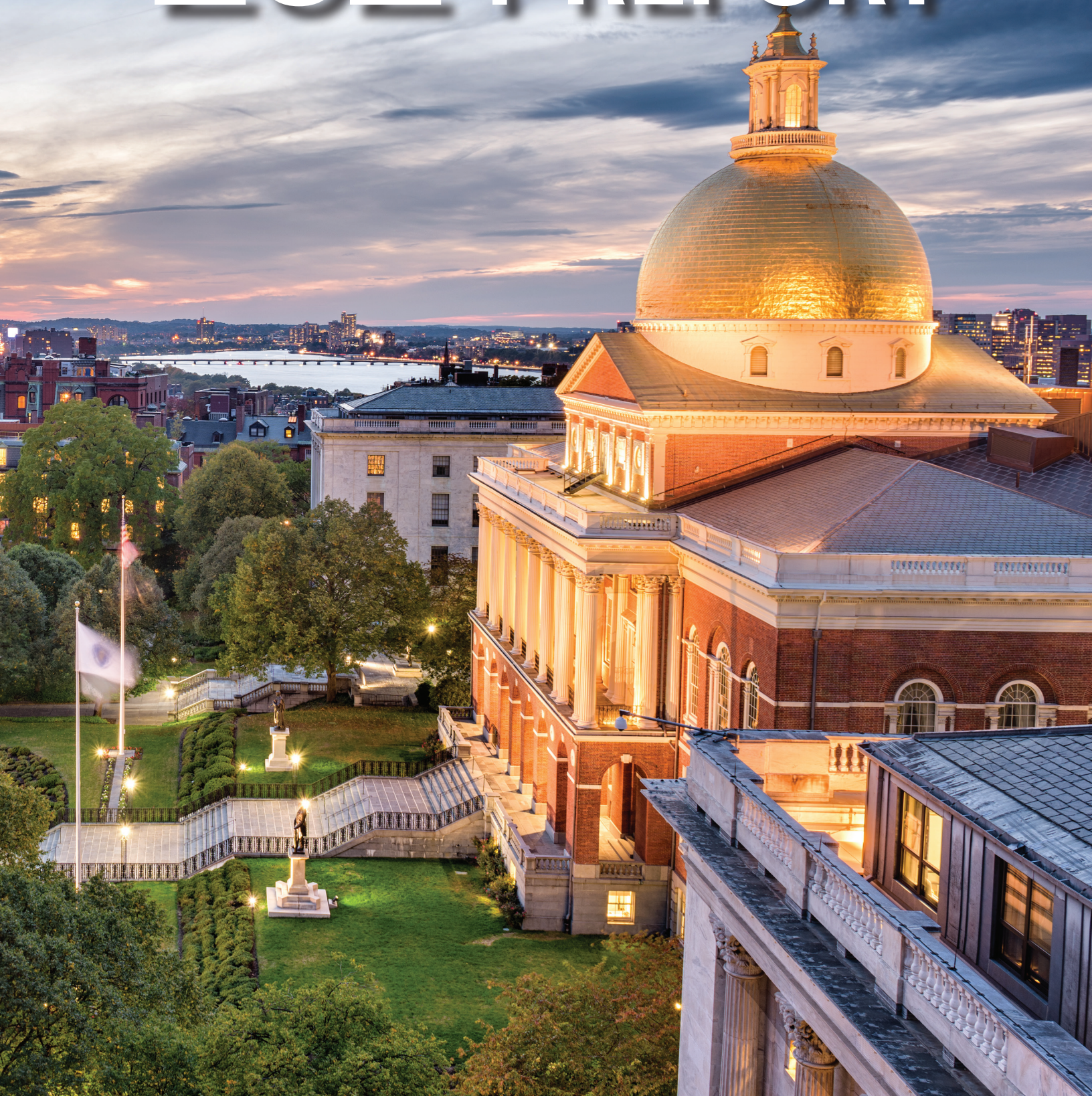


Massachusetts State Rehabilitation Council

2021 ANNUAL REPORT





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A Letter from the Chair



Toward
Inclusive
Excellence

Today, I sit in a seat that my ancestors never even had the opportunity to approach. Do I refuse this position because

workplaces are looking for people through whom they can put their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion on display? No. As a Black and Indigenous Person of Color chosen for leadership, it is important for me to acknowledge this tension, and not allow it to overshadow the competence and diligence that I bring to my responsibilities. I made a deliberate choice to accept this opportunity, hoping to tear down walls and build up individuals.

As Chair, I lead the work, but I cannot work alone. While I am grateful for the trust that the SRC membership and the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission executive team has in my abilities, these talents are only as effective as their capacity to bring out the best in each of you, who are change agents in your own spaces. The contribution of your talent to this Council's work has the potential to transform lives by advancing vocational

rehabilitation in ways that will help individuals with disabilities find meaningful employment. Let's improve vocational rehabilitation service delivery to give every individual with a disability the opportunity to use their talents and express their unique interests through careers they love.

I want to thank our outgoing Chair, Dawn Clark, whose many years of leadership laid a foundation for the work the SRC is accomplishing today. Dawn selected Committee Chairs who bring passion and leadership to the tasks the Council undertakes. I appreciate the SRC and its Committees for all the hard work and energy which we only capture through snapshots in the annual report. I encourage you review this report, particularly the FY21 Committee highlights, to learn more about the SRC Committees and their accomplishments this past year. Most of these tasks are ongoing; I hope the report inspires you to consider where you might be uniquely suited to assist as we forge ahead.

Together, let's broaden the perspective of what's possible. Let us build with the mindset of Billie Holiday who said, "The difficult I'll do right now. The impossible will take a little while."

Inez S. Canada, Esq.
Chair, Statewide Rehabilitation Council

DO YOU BELIEVE IN AN
INCLUSIVE WORKFORCE?

JOIN OUR COUNCIL



The Massachusetts State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) ensures that individuals of all abilities are provided with an equal opportunity to receive the programs, services, and supports they need to gain competitive employment. To learn more about the SRC, and how you can become involved, contact mrc.staterehabcouncil@mass.gov.



MISSION & VISION

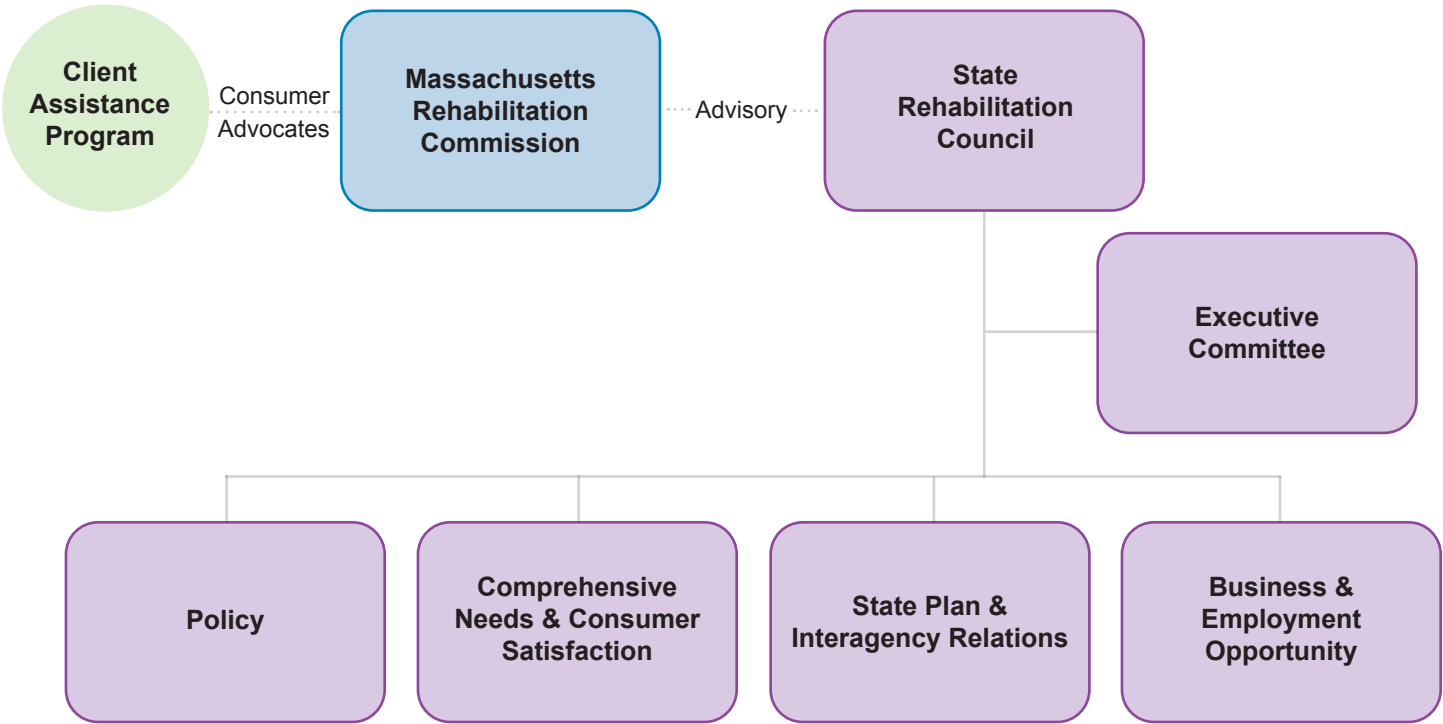
MISSION

The primary goal of the SRC is to partner with MRC to ensure that people with disabilities are provided with an equal opportunity to receive the programs, services and supports needed to gain competitive integrated employment. The SRC provides a forum for consumer input resulting in recommendations and advice to the agency. We aim to provide a path to high quality, value-based, vocational rehabilitation services that lead to meaningful, sustainable, and competitive employment for consumers with disabilities, guided by the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion.

VISION

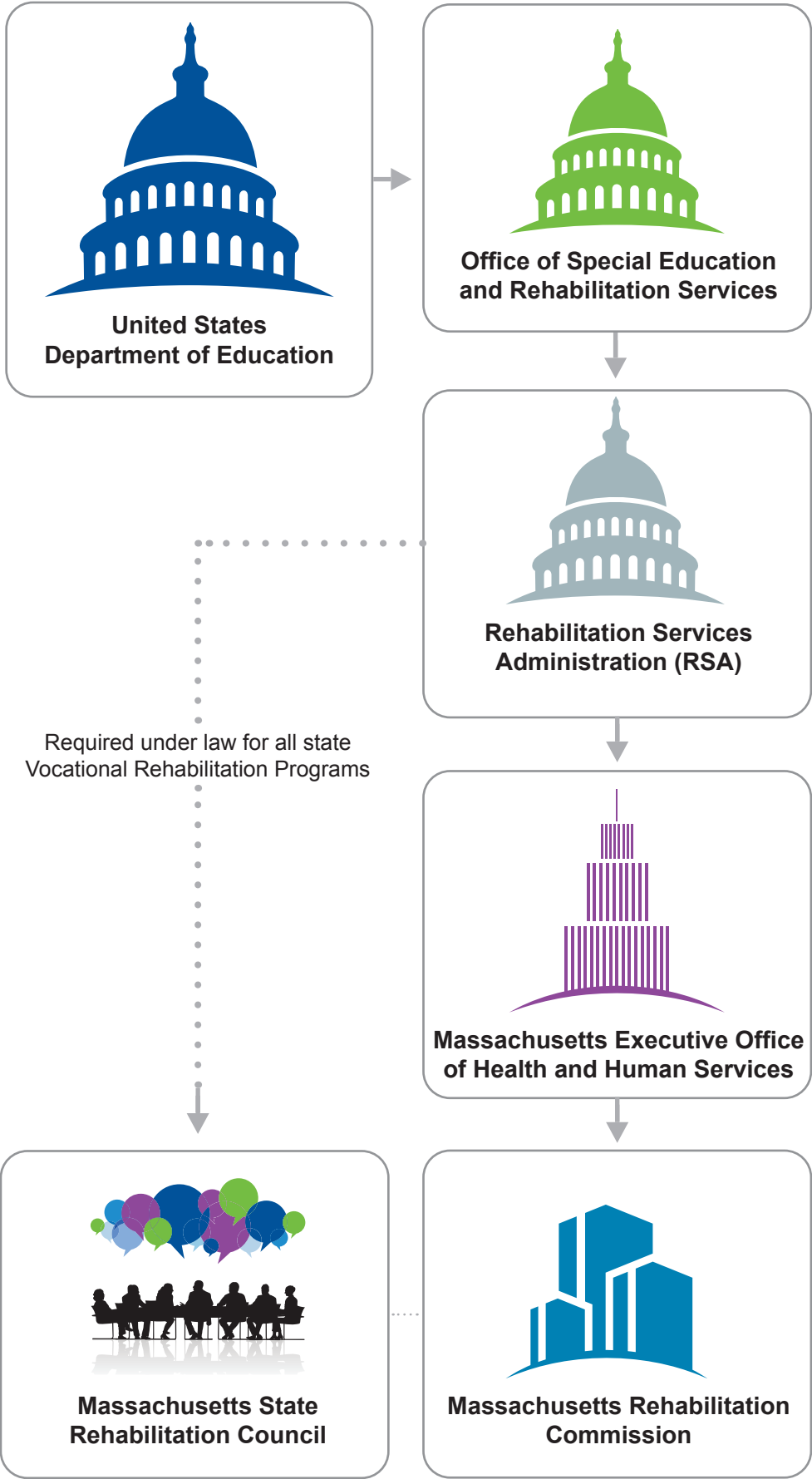
Our vision is to break the historic bonds of poverty by providing a dynamic pathway to economic self-sufficiency for people with disabilities eligible for vocational rehabilitation services.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE



GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE

For funding and oversight



Massachusetts State Rehabilitation Council APPOINTED MEMBERS

Matthew Bander
Disabilities Rep. 4

Youcef J. Bellil ("Joe")
Disabilities Rep. 2

Deputy Commissioner Kate Biebel
EXO MRC

Inez Canada*
Disabilities Rep. 7

James Carnazza
MRC VR Rep.

Lisa Chiango
Disabilities Rep. 1

Barbara Cipriani
Business/Labor/Industries 3

Dawn E. Clark
Disabilities Rep. 5

Richard Colantonio
Disabilities Rep. 3

Paula Euber
MRC VR Rep.

Naomi Goldberg
Client Assistance Program Rep.

Steve LaMaster
Community Rehab Services Provider Rep.

Lusa Lo
Higher Education Rep. 2

Catherine D. O'Neil
Business/Labor/Industries 4

Katherine R. Queally
Un-served/Underserved Rep. 2

Cheryl Scott
Workforce Investment Board

Ellie Starr
Business/Labor/Industries 2

Olympia Stroud
Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Heather Wood
Disabilities Rep. 6

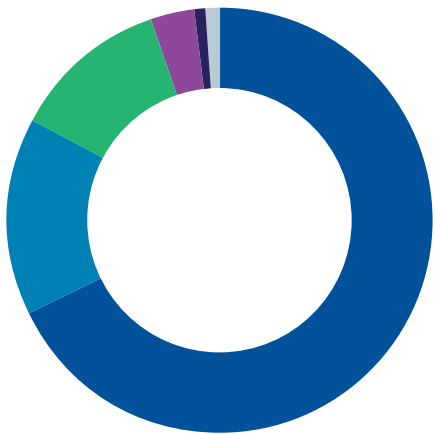
Rosanna Woodmansee
Business/Labor/Industries 1



FISCAL YEAR 2021 AT A GLANCE

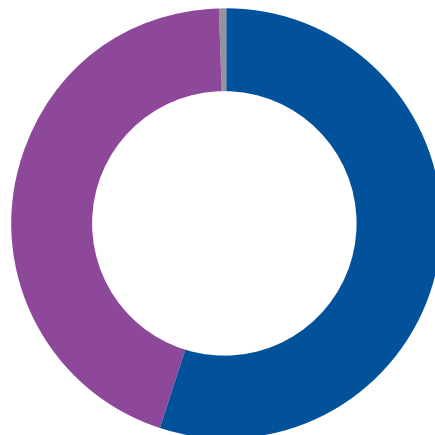
CONSUMER RACE

White	78.7%	●
Black/African American.....	17.7%	●
Hispanic/Latinx	13.7%	●
Asian/Pacific Islander	3.8%	●
Native American	1.1%	●
Chose not to identify	1.0%	●

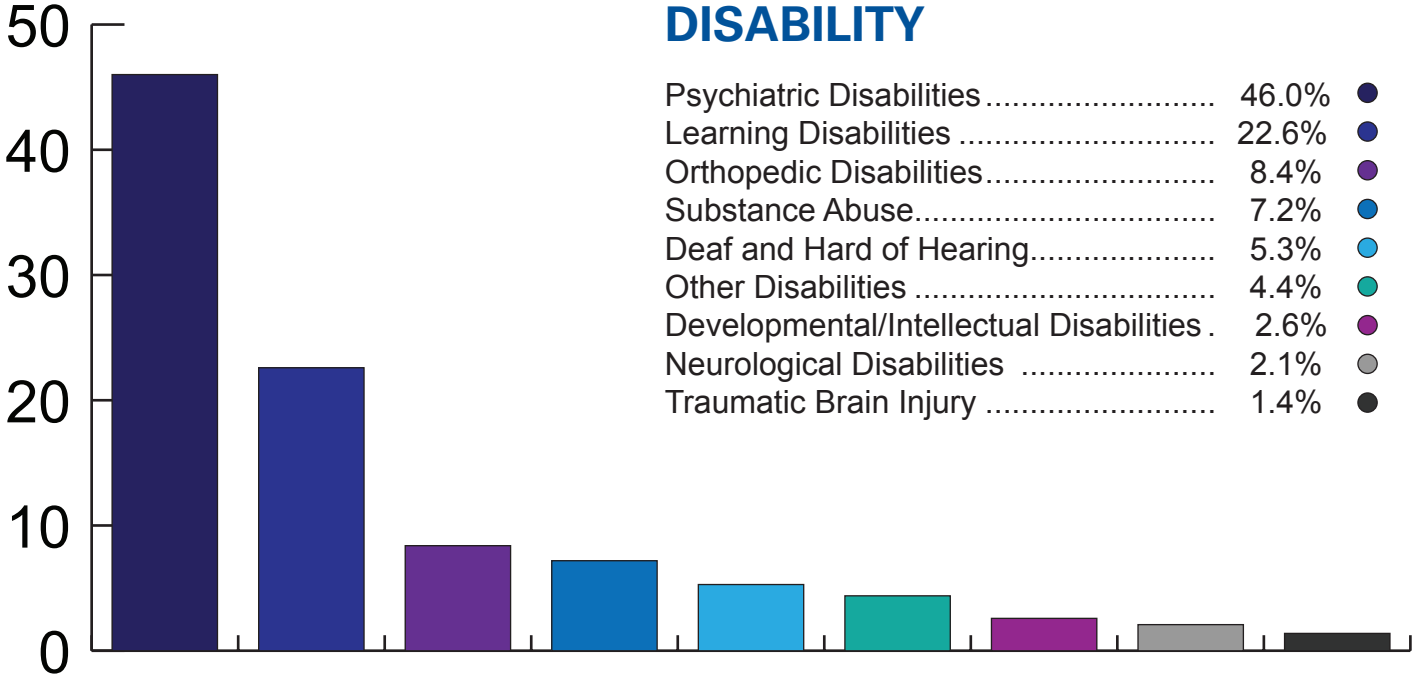


CONSUMER GENDER

Male.....	55.0%	●
Female.....	44.7%	●
Chose not to identify.....	0.3%	●



DISABILITY



FISCAL YEAR 2021 FAST FACTS



2,727 citizens with disabilities were successfully placed into competitive employment



The earnings of these successfully placed employees in MA in the first year were **\$67.6 million**



14,712 consumers enrolled in training/education programs

Average age

31.8

of consumers served

Approximately

21,357

individuals received VR services from MRC

Approximately

99.4%

individuals became employed with health insurance

CELEBRATING SRC'S *Dawn Clark*

By: Nick Pizzolato



For more than a decade, Reverend Dr. Dawn Clark has used her voice as a life-long advocate for people experiencing disabilities as the chair of the Massachusetts State Rehabilitation Council (SRC). The council partners with the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) to help ensure that people with disabilities are provided with an equal opportunity to receive the programs, services and supports needed to gain competitive integrated employment. Clark isn't going that far, she will continue to advise the SRC in her role as Disability Representative, as Inez Canada has transitioned into the role of Committee Chair.

"I want to thank Dawn Clark, whose many years of leadership laid a foundation for the work the SRC is accomplishing today." Canada said recently. "Dawn selected Committee Chairs who bring passion and leadership to the tasks the Council undertakes."

Ten years ago, Clark, who was born with cerebral palsy, was asked to fill out a nomination form to join the SRC. Soon after she received word that Governor Deval Patrick had appointed her to the council.

This appointment made sense because Clark believes she's one of the first people MRC helped in the mid-1960s. New work as a member of the SRC was going to be trying, but she had no qualms about working hard because that's how her mother raised her.

"She was the one who did exercises with me every day for 18 years," Clark remembered. "I went to camp. I was a girl scout. I was involved with church youth groups and took dance lessons." She remembered that it was her physical therapist who recommended MRC to her.

Dawn didn't let anything slow her down, earning her BA in history from Ricker College, a ME, Master of Divinity with an emphasis in pastoral care from Boston University, and her Doctorate in Ministry from Bangor Theological Seminary.

For the last decade she has worked in the City of Worcester's Accessibility Office, assisting the Director with the Accessibility Advisory Commission, coordinating tours of city hall to people who experience disabilities and their allies, and working with volunteers presenting Disability Etiquette Training Workshops for city staff and community groups.

During her time with SRC, she's seen MRC take steps moving forward to break free of the title "best-kept secret." "To say that," commenting on the phrase, "is tough. But things have been changing for the better, and the work continues."

She added that recently MRC has been hiring talented

people, which has helped the positive growth. "There was a time that change was slow, and it was frustrating because it was challenging to get people excited about the SRC."

But she's excited about the relationship now between the Council and the Commission. "Commissioner Wolf gives clear updates on programs and initiatives, and we have a better sense of what's going on. We have a single mission and vision in mind. And even though we came from different perspectives – our goal is to get these people jobs."

For the future, Dr. Clark wants to see the stigma around hidden disabilities disappear and focus on reaching constituents most in need of services in underserved areas.

"More people are being diagnosed with mental health and learning disabilities, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. But it's not easy for people to disclose these types of disabilities. I hope that the MRC/SRC partnership continues to find new ways to help these people break into the workforce. People like me need to feel comfortable and live independently."



COMMITTEE REPORTS

Executive Committee Chairperson: Inez Canada

The SRC Executive Committee has a talented team of Committee Chairs and pending appointees who have dedicated significant time and efforts to the management of SRC operations outside of the four quarterly meetings.

In FY20, the Council mourned with communities of color torn apart by hate-fueled violence and by healthcare inequities exposed through a global pandemic. We pledged to become racial justice allies. So, FY21 started with the SRC putting those words into action. The greatest test of whether we mean what we say is the business we go about when the conversation is over. If I had to summarize the focus of the SRC in FY21, I would say we started tearing down walls so that we can build up individuals. For individuals with disabilities seeking and receiving vocational rehabilitation services, the most impactful ways are:

Learning from Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) consultants, Health Management Associates (HMA), how to change the way the SRC thinks about and applies diversity, equity, and inclusion and our DEI principles in the

work of the SRC.

- HMA was hired to assess, train, and equip the Council by providing leaderships skills, tools, and resources to tear down systemic barriers based on race

Collaborating with MRC and its consultants to redesign of the needs and satisfaction surveys to better capture the experience of individuals receiving vocational rehabilitation services.

- Feedback has included ideas for reaching individuals eligible for and receiving vocational rehabilitation services, at which service delivery points to send surveys, and how to draft culturally sensitive questions that capture individual feedback as accurately as possible

See the Consumer Needs and Satisfaction Committee report on page__

Working with the MRC Director of Communications to rebrand our public facing communications and messaging about the purpose of the SRC and our partnership MRC, and the potential impact our work could have on vocational rehabilitation service delivery, starting with the 2021 Annual report The SRC is a public body seeking individuals with

diverse disabilities, backgrounds, and experiences who are interested in employment services for individuals with disabilities. This civic service opportunity is an unpaid but rewarding in other ways. Anyone can participate as a member of the public. Individuals who choose to serve as a voting member can apply through the SRC for appointment by the Governor.

We are looking to recruit members who will be open to learning and growing in an action oriented environment. Generally, individuals should be:

- Willing to learn the basics about vocational rehabilitation
- Willing to embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion
- Humble enough to admit what they don't know; confident enough to speak up about what they do
- Active listeners who take in information and ask the questions
- Able to see problems and think through solutions
- Able to communicate ideas and concerns

Review the highlights of the SRC work from FY21 in this report to see if any fits your interests!

Policy Committee Chairperson: Naomi Goldberg

The SRC Policy Committee reviews and analyzes Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) policies and procedures to ensure service delivery aligns with federal and state VR regulations and policy guidance. The Committee recommends revisions to and the development of policies that help consumers better understand the VR process and what is necessary to attain competitive integrated employment. Also, it recommends changes to policies to fix systemic matters as appropriate. Finally, the Committee periodically reviews and recommends updates to the Council Bylaws.

During FY21, the SRC Policy Committee focused its work on the two FY21 State Plan recommendations to which it was assigned: develop standardized VR workforce strategies to prepare and support students entering post-secondary educational settings and increase the SRC's understanding and knowledge of MRC procurement and contracting processes. Both recommendations are aimed at improving vocational rehabilitation services and outcomes for consumers.

When assigned recommendations, the committee must always determine what impactful steps and actions it can take to truly support the recommendations considering the SRC's advisory role. Additionally, part of developing an approach to work on these recommendations must include consideration of diversity, equity, and inclusion. As the committee seeks to improve services and outcomes for consumers it must consider the unique needs of all its consumers and ensure that policies and practices do not inadvertently exclude consumers of color.

FY21 Recommendations
Develop standardized VR workforce strategies to prepare and support students entering post-secondary educational settings.

The Policy Committee continued to work on this recommendation that had been a carryover from the previous year. Originally, the recommendation sought to create designated positions for vocational rehabilitation counselors (VRCs) who serve college bound students. The intent of the recommendation was to pair college bound consumers with VRCs who had specific expertise in college related matters and resources to facilitate a positive experience. Upon learning that it was not possible to create such positions, the recommendation was revised to focus on developing a set of materials that VRCs could use to enhance the experience of their college bound consumers. During FY21, the committee determined that it would develop a packet of information that would serve to provide college bound students with disabilities with important information and resources. To determine what information should be included in the packet, the committee consulted with two VRCs about best practices and resources that they use to support their college-bound consumers, as well as sought input from members of the committee about what information college bound students need to know from their VRCs.

Ultimately the committee determined that it would create some resource documents and would gather others from existing publications. The core of the packet included a comprehensive checklist that college students can use to identify important contacts and other relevant information for school. The checklist, which was developed by the committee, can be filled out individually or with a VRC and it lists the contact information for the VRC, the financial aid office, disability services office, academic supports etc. It also prompts a consumer to list important dates at the school, and community supports, groups, and clubs that may meet their individual needs. Other information in the packet included a financial aid resource sheet, an FAQ on the basic rights of college students with disabilities, a fact sheet on obtaining reasonable accommodation in school, and a fact sheet to support online learning strategies for students with



COMMITTEE REPORTS

disabilities. The committee submitted this packet of information to MRC and requested that they consider using the resources with their college bound consumers. The submission of the packet marked the completion of the committee's work on this recommendation.

Increase the SRC's understanding and knowledge of MRC procurement and contracting processes.

During FY21 the Policy Committee continued to expand its knowledge of procurement and contracting. This recommendation was a carryover recommendation from the previous two years. As originally written, the recommendation sought to ensure that sufficient services such as tutors were procured so that they would be available to consumers and there would not be delays in service. As the committee attempted to work on the recommendation, it became clear that members did not know enough about the subject to offer meaningful feedback to MRC. Consequently, the committee refocused its activities on learning about procurement so that it would eventually get to a place where it can provide concrete recommendations.

In FY20 the Committee committed to ensuring that when working on this issue that it evaluates whether vendors with whom MRC contracts adequately represent the communities that they serve, particularly communities of color.

Throughout FY21 the committee met with various MRC staff to learn about procurement and contracting processes and the various barriers that exist to purchasing services when there is no contract. With its baseline knowledge of the process, the committee began discussing

how it could take actions on the recommendation. A plan was not conceived during FY21; however, the committee has identified areas of interest.

These include ensuring that CIES vendors represent the linguistic and cultural needs of consumers, that there be an alternative process available when a consumer needs a service and there is no vendor on contract, and that MRC continues to pursue additional vendors so that there is more choice, among others. Since the recommendation is ongoing, in FY22 the committee plans to shift its focus from learning about procurement to determining a set of action steps that it can take to address the goal of ensuring that there are sufficient vendors to meet the wide range of services needed by consumers and in consideration of the cultural and linguistic needs of diverse populations.

Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment Committee & Consumer Satisfaction Committee **Chairperson: Olympia Stroud**

The Statewide Consumers Needs Assessment Committee ensures individual perspectives are included in the process of evaluating MRC VR services. As the chair of The Statewide Consumers Needs Assessment Committee, I'm happy to share a few accomplishments for FY20-21.

Lifting Individuals' Voices

The committee collaborated with the Synergy Consulting Co. to lift individuals' voices and share their concerns and issues with the Synergy Consulting Co. to ensure the working group best captured the needs of individuals with disabilities served by MRC.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion Work

DEI work was an important goal to SRC Executive Committee this year, which transitioned well into the Consumers Needs Assessment Committee. Our committee has dedicated ourselves to DEI work and wearing the lens of equity to truly mean; all means all, from geographically to representation in Counselors, and making the right fit for every individual with disabilities.

Recruitment

A continuation goal of the Consumers Needs Assessment Committee is recruiting individual with disabilities; uplifting individuals voices in our committee, and as I will keep scouting. As Chair, I'm so proud of the Needs Assessment Committee and the members who have come with their ideas/concerns and voices to make change for all individuals with disabilities feel like they matter, belong, and their story/voice is heard, because "all means all."



Joint Committee State Plan Committee & Interagency Relations Committee **Chairperson: Joe Bellil**

The State Plan and Interagency Relations Committee ensures the SRC meets its obligations regarding input from consumers in the development of both the MRC public VR(vocational rehabilitation) State Plan and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Combined State Plan.

During the FY 2021 State Plan Committee meetings, committee members reviewed and responded to MRC's responses to the 2021 SRC Recommendations. The committees, in partnership with MRC, worked on their assigned recommendations throughout the year.

In February 2021, the committee had a presentation by Janet LaBreck on the State goals and priorities of VR and assisting in the preparation of the VR services of the Combined State Plan.

Janet LaBreck is the principal and co-founder of Synergy Consulting Partners and in 2013 was the Commissioner of the Rehabilitation

Services Administration (RSA) within the United States Department of Education.

The committee discussed the focus for the 2022 Recommendations. The members strongly encouraged each SRC committee to have their recommendations have a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) lens on it. Each committee reviewed the current recommendations that they were working on and discussed what next year's recommendations should be based on what was accomplished this year and other related needs.

On May 6, 2021 all the committee recommendations were forwarded to the Executive Committee where a draft FY 2022 SRC Recommendations document was created.

On June 3, 2021 the Executive Committee reviewed this document and approved the FY 2022 SRC Recommendations to be presented at the June SRC meeting.

On June 17, 2021 the FY 2022 SRC Recommendations and Timeline were presented to the SRC members at June's quarterly meeting. The SRC members voted to approve the FY 2022 SRC Recommendations.

On June 18, 2021 the SRC forwarded the approved FY 2022 SRC Recommendations to MRC for MRC's response.

Business and Employment Opportunity Committee **Chairperson: Steve LaMaster**

The SRC Business and Employment Opportunity Committee is responsible for reviewing, analyzing, and providing guidance to the MRC on methods and best practices for employment and employment services.

Past Fiscal Year Activities involved: Supporting increased employment of individuals with disabilities in the Commonwealth. The committee identified MRC's participation in a cross-agency working group designed to meet state diversity targets of people with disabilities, and received information from this interagency working group, referred to as the Disability Employment Action Committee (DEAC) on the commonwealth's current performance on meeting diversity targets; data showed that workforce numbers for Persons with Disabilities in the

COMMITTEE REPORTS

Commonwealth remain below parity. The committee oriented members of the Commonwealth Human Resources Division (HRD) about the it's recommendation to MRC to increase efforts across agencies of the Commonwealth to meet hiring diversity targets. Bill Allen, BEOC committee member from MRC, has agreed to share additional information as it becomes available through the DEAC's efforts.

The BEOC recommended that MRC increase availability and accessibility of SRC materials online and develop a robust communications, marketing, and branding strategy for MRC. In the last year, MRC began a rebranding effort with consultant Think Argus, partnered with MCB to ensure coordinated accessibility of materials, resources, and processes, and hired a Communications Director. The BEOC will work with MRC's Communications Director in the coming year to review and update SRC promotional materials, and ensure they are inclusive of DEI and Racial Equity best practices.

Finally, the BEOC had made a recommendation that MRC update and make more user-friendly all self-employment resource materials. For the coming year, MRC has agreed to work with the BEOC to develop a baseline understanding



of self-employment, including but not limited to assessing needs (consumer and counselor), data trends (state and national), and identified best-practices and partners, to inform a strategy for self-employment services within MRC.



Getting to know the OFFICE OF INDIVIDUAL & FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

As part of MRC Commissioner Wolf's commitment to elevating the voices and leadership of the disability community within all decision-making spaces at MRC, the Office of Individual and Family Engagement was brought to life in 2020. Led by Amanda Costa (Director) and Manel Desvallons (Family Partnership the office was charged with developing a plan for the agency to work with MRC consumers to solicit input on new initiatives and operational issues and provide opportunities for ongoing dialogue.

Priorities for the coming year
In recent months, The Office of Individual and Family Engagement has developed multiple platforms to listen and learn from MRC Consumers. In October 2021, MRC hosted it's second Listening and Learning Forum, a two-hour virtual space to bring together disability community members, families, and professional stakeholders to learn about MRC Services directly from other consumers, provide feedback on upcoming MRC initiatives, and engage in community peer support. Over 130 citizens across the Commonwealth were in attendance. Additionally, MRC will disseminate it's first consumer and family newsletter in November, focused on providing success stories, event highlights, and ongoing resources for consumers and their supporters.

Collaboration with SRC
Amanda and Manel have provided support and consultation with ongoing advisory councils across the agency, including partnering with the Statewide Rehabilitation Council to engage the voices and feedback of MRC consumers. Olympia Stroud, SRC Consumer Satisfaction Committee Chair has collaborated with the Office to build a new and innovative approach to understanding consumer service experiences. Using cutting edge software, MRC will outreach to those receiving employment



services at targeted timepoints throughout their engagement, to better understand what barriers they are facing, and areas for improving service delivery. Consumer Satisfaction Committee members, including MRC consumers, were instrumental in providing ongoing feedback in the development of this model, which is set to launch in 2022.

Office of Individual & Family Engagement Vision
Our vision is based on the philosophy that individuals with disabilities have the same basic rights as people without disabilities. We aspire to become the model service delivery agency in Massachusetts and beyond. We will do this by breaking down barriers and ensuring individuals with disabilities have full and equitable access to the services and supports they want and need to live self-sufficient and engaging lives in the communities of their choice.

RECOMMENDATIONS FISCAL YEAR 22

Recommendation 1 Responsible SRC Committee: Executive

The SRC seeks MRC's support in developing a strategic vision, goals, and leadership competencies for the SRC that integrates and infuses Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and Racial Equity principles and values. The work of the SRC specific to DEI/RE would inform and advise how best to reach, serve, and support unserved/underserved consumers and potential consumers.

The SRC will evaluate its own work and review what MRC is doing for DEI work. The SRC requests that MRC provide the SRC with updated reports and other related DEI information on a quarterly basis. This information will be used by the SRC for:

- a. Refining the Council's definitions and vision/mission, including a focus on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.
- b. Recruiting diverse voting Statewide Rehabilitation Council members.
- c. Developing structured processes for governing all activities of the SRC, ensuring a DEI lens.
- d. Training on how to recognize disparate impact within organizational structures (e.g., policies and procedures) on Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC)

MRC Response

MRC agrees on highlighting DEI work within the SRC – this maps on to a similar emphasis within MRC, as evidenced by DEI and Racial Equity focused work being one of five active Roadmap priority areas for the agency, our recent agency racial equity SWOT, etc. Our shared commitment is also demonstrated by the SRC's current DEI consultation with HMA. MRC proposes to amend

the recommendation as such:

- Edit recommendation to read, "Develop a strategic vision, goals, and leadership competencies for the SRC that integrate and infuse Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and Racial Equity principles and values." – the State Plan Committee (SPC) accepts this recommendation and has made the edit.
- The "goals" statement above (paragraph 2) appears to be missing. MRC assumes that defining concrete "goals" specific to DEI/RE will be part of the work with HMA, so perhaps it is premature to define goals at this point in time. The SPC accepts this recommendation and has deleted this paragraph.
- Edit language that discusses, "SRC will evaluate its own work and what MRC is doing for DEI work." MRC is happy to share with the SRC, on a quarterly basis, ongoing DEI activities within the agency, but would like to exclude language specific to SRC evaluating MRC DEI efforts. The SPC has revised the language and used the word "review" instead of "evaluate". It is assumed that SRC would offer feedback on any VR activity or policy as per the SRC's role.
- MRC would like the SRC to consider adding focus or a goal re: the work of the SRC specific to DEI/RE would inform and advise how best to reach, serve, and support unserved/underserved consumers and potential consumers (so adding a focus on consumers to this work). The SPC accepts this recommendation and has inserted this goal in the first paragraph.

Recommendation 2 Responsible SRC Committee: Business & Employment

Support employment of individuals

with disabilities in the Commonwealth through developing a baseline understanding of current data and trends, which can inform a high-level strategy to increase the numbers of state employees with disabilities. Include the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion lens in this work, and work with MRC to ensure the robustness of this effort.

MRC Response

MRC continues to support and align with a high-level goal of supporting individuals with disabilities with employment via the Commonwealth. MRC is able to share data and trends of EHS agencies specific to rates of employment among those with self-identified disabilities. MRC would like to note that movement on this goal will require high-level engagement and strategy development across agencies (e.g., MOD, DMH, DDS, etc) and partnership with other Directors and Commissioners. MRC is happy to partner with the SRC in that work. MRC has no modifications to this recommendation.

Recommendation 3 Responsible SRC Committee: Business & Employment

Increase availability and accessibility of SRC materials online and develop a robust communications, marketing, and branding strategy for SRC. Make materials available to SRC for review related to accessibility to all including from a DEI lens.

MRC Response

MRC continues to agree there is more work to be done in increasing the virtual visibility and accessibility of SRC materials. SRC materials are included within the current rebranding work ongoing with MRC with consultant Think Argus. MRC is also partnering with MCB to develop

a more systematic and agency-wide approach to ensuring accessibility of our materials, resources, and processes. MRC proposes to amend the recommendation as such:

- Edit recommendation to read, "Increase availability and accessibility of SRC materials online, as part of a robust communications, marketing, and branding strategy that is inclusive of and integrates DEI and Racial Equity best practices." The SPC accepts this revision and has made the change.
- MRC would like to work with the SRC to best determine which points of MRC communication would best inform the SRC. The SPC is interpreting that MRC is asking the SRC to provide MRC with more specific feedback on what the issues are with the SRC materials online.

Recommendation 4 Responsible SRC Committee: Policy

Increase number of available vendors to better support consumer informed choice. Areas of focus should include the cultural and linguistic needs of diverse populations, as well as increasing vendors in geographic areas with historically limited choice. Additionally, there should be a transparent procedure in place to purchase services with limited delay when there is no contract in place.

MRC Response

MRC agrees with the importance of needing to have sufficient numbers and quality of vendors to meet consumers' needs, with particular understanding of the reality of an insufficient vendor pool to provide culturally and linguistically competent services and supports. We assert that "ensuring sufficient vendors" is a laudable goal, albeit a long-term one that will take more than one year to achieve. We propose some initial steps that include focusing on increasing our list of available vendors. Marketing will be key in these efforts. MRC proposes to amend the recommendation as such:

- Edit recommendation to read,

"Increase number of available vendors to better support consumer informed choice. Areas of focus should include the cultural and linguistic needs of diverse populations, as well as increasing vendors in geographic areas with historically limited choice." The SPC accepts this revision to replace the first two sentences.

- MRC will need to better understand this component of the recommendation – "Additionally, there should be a transparent procedure in place to purchase services with limited delay when there is no contract in place." MRC is bound by Commonwealth procurement practices, so there would need to be conversation to better understand the goals and intent of this statement. The SPC understands the limitations of the procurement system and the Policy Committee has been consulting with MRC about potential ways that services can be purchased when there is no relationship with the state. The committee will continue to research the matter and continue to offer feedback on potential solutions.
- MRC's Office of Fiscal Management and Budget can work with the SRC to both support understanding of procurement parameters as well as identify pathways and opportunities available. The Policy Committee has met with this department and others to learn about procurement process.

Recommendation 5 Responsible SRC Committee: Business & Employment

Develop a baseline understanding of self-employment, including but not limited to assessing needs (consumer and counselor), data trends (state and national), and identified best-practices and partners, to inform a strategy for self-employment services within MRC.

MRC Response to FY22-5

MRC recognizes that interest in self employment has increased during FY21 as a result of Covid-19 and

individuals needing to pivot regarding employment. We also acknowledge that self employment has traditionally accounted for a small number of goals (FY20=98) and placements (FY19=7; FY20=18) within VR. We propose that the focus of this goal is first to identify what is happening re: self employment within other VR agencies – how are they responding, what resources are they using, etc. Additionally, counselors may need additional resources and tools to support to assist consumers with self employment goals. MRC would like the focus more to be on considering how self employment fits into a larger array of employment supports offered by the agency, as well as partner with other entities (e.g., DOL, ICI) who have a track record of focus on self employment. As such, we propose to do some bigger picture thinking, with the SRC, before jumping into developing resources. MRC proposes to amend the recommendation as such:

- Edit recommendation to read, "Develop a baseline understanding of self-employment, including but not limited to assessing needs (consumer and counselor), data trends (state and national), and identified best-practices and partners, to inform a strategy for self-employment services within MRC." BOE accepts this revision.
- We propose not focusing on developing targeted resources and/or translation of these resources until the above referenced baseline understanding and priority areas are fully formed. BEO recommends finding ways for MRC to support people already involved with a Self-Employment Goal in an Individual Plan of Employment to be able to access the resources that are available in the community now.





Pictured: Caitlin with her family. Her partner Paul and her three children, Nathan, Ronan, and Shay.

Gaining Independence Through VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION

By: Nick Pizzolato

Caitlin O’Leary had heard about the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) before attending an orientation session but did not understand how the agency would provide her resources to succeed. Her father, who was also a person who experienced disabilities, and had heard of MRC, brought a reluctant Caitlin to learn more. “I’m not like any of these people,” she remembered thinking.

Eleven months before that, Caitlin was in a car accident, causing her to be in a coma for a month. As a result of the collision, she suffered a diffuse axonal injury, a traumatic brain injury resulting from the brain rapidly shifting inside the skull. When she regained consciousness, Caitlin needed speech, occupational, and physical therapy as a

part of the recovery process. One of the reasons she didn’t choose to attend the orientation session was that her father was her source of transportation. “I told him, ‘No! I don’t want to go’,” she said with a smile remembering her late father’s insistence that she attend.

Since that first session, Caitlin has earned her associate’s and bachelor’s degrees. She’s been able to achieve her employment and education goals, and because of the programs and resources that MRC provides, she’s been able to afford to buy a car and a house for her family.

This economic independence and confidence in her skills and value result from vocational rehabilitation (VR).

VR, a division of MRC, is focused on providing people experiencing disabilities resources and services to help them complete their educational journey, develop employment skills, and connect them with employers. VR can also help provide physical tools like laptops, software programs, and hearing aids to those in need of them.

VR isn’t a one-size-fits-all solution. Every person is different, and every program is going to differ.

“As a vocational rehabilitation counselor (VRC), it is my goal to understand where the individual is at that point in time, as well as to identify the support and skills needed so the consumer can be successful,” said Caitlin’s counselor Crystal Hodgkins. “My job is to ensure they are happy with their plan, that it is effective, taking into account strengths, limitations, and it provides the support they need to find and keep a job throughout changes in life circumstances.”

VRC’s take the time to get to know their partner and find out their short and long-term goals. Not everyone knows what they want to do, and that’s ok. VRC’s are there to help figure out the next step. They use their knowledge and network of professionals and businesses to find the right fit for that person.

“Everyone has their own experience and response to having a disability. My job is to appreciate their experience and help them to reach an outcome that is positive for them,” said Hodgkins, who began her career as VRC after working with individuals who needed assistance. “I knew I wanted to facilitate work for people and assist them to feel empowered, confident, and worthwhile.”

For someone like Michael Panchu, a recent college graduate, MRC helped him continue to get the education necessary to be placed in his current job, a technical support engineer at Zerto.

“MRC helped me in pursuing continuing education in the IT field after I graduated from the University of Massachusetts Boston,” he shared. “The Cisco certificate program served as a nice buffer to keep my resume as sharp as possible, during tough times.”

Colleen Moran, the director of workplace integration at Mass General Brigham, has been an employer partner with MRC for more than 20 years. “MRC has a constant pool of talented candidates as well as a rounded team of job placement specialists and counselors who can connect appropriate job seekers to open jobs.”

To employers who are looking for qualified candidates, she has one thing to say, “Call them. They have great and talented candidates who are ready to work.”

Panchu has the same advice for those who experience disabilities but don’t know where they can turn to for help.

“There is no shame in asking for help to get where you need to go to in your professional career.” He added, “The process and support at MRC are great. A lot of us don’t have the fortune of going through life without hurdles, and MRC does a good job of stepping in to mitigate them. Take advantage of the services they have to offer. It was great to know that MRC has connections to various companies.”

“The vocational plan is driven by the consumer. Consumers have the right to a plan that sets them toward their goal. The counselor’s role is to guide them and advise them on how to achieve their goal or maybe choose a new one,” says Crystal.

“I never, ever wanted to be treated like I had a disability,” said O’Leary. “I want to do everything on my own, but I can’t. Crystal helped me get the help I needed but also expected me to work hard.”

“My success is on my terms, and I like that.”



Massachusetts State Rehabilitation Council

2021 ANNUAL REPORT